

September 3, 2021

Jonathan F. Mitchell, Mayor
City Hall
133 William Street
New Bedford, MA 0740

RE: ARPA Process and Investments in New Bedford

Dear Mayor Mitchell,

We would like to begin by thanking you for being able to join us at our upcoming meeting on September 9th to have an in-depth discussion about the strategy for public outreach and deployment of the \$64,729,754 in ARPA funds that have been designated for New Bedford by the U.S. Treasury Department.

It is our understanding that the final guidance is still pending until later this fall; the Interim Final Rule sets forth eligible uses that include: responding to acute pandemic-response needs, filling revenue shortfalls, and supporting the communities and populations hardest-hit by COVID-19.

In early May of 2020, we wrote to you as the COVID-19 pandemic was causing unprecedented viral sickness and fatalities, while simultaneously laying bare economic and social justice weaknesses that have been hidden in plain sight. In that letter, we outlined our expectations for a multi-year pandemic reality of three general phases: mitigation, recovery, and expansion. Even now, COVID-19 has a stubborn grip on New Bedford (and society at-large), and much needs to be done in the recovery phase just to ensure we don't slide back into unwanted but necessary shutdowns.

Throughout this battle, we encourage continued dialog and trust that you continue to employ the Regeneration Project Committee as a resource—both as a committee and the individual members and entities they represent—to advancing the work that lies ahead. This will take a big team effort, and it is not the sole responsibility of government to get us where we need and want to be.

In the following paragraphs, we have outlined the priorities for robust public engagement, strong program management principles and operations, and specific project recommendations for immediate actions, short-term needs, and longer-term objectives.

Early and Robust Public Engagement

We cannot state this more emphatically, when we ask that the City take every step to be as outgoing as possible with community engagement. As you continue your planning for outreach and education, we encourage you to look to other cities and states or trusted policy partners such as MassINC or the Boston Federal Reserve for best practices examples that could work here. We suggest fully utilizing the City's website, radio spots, news media, and short informational videos designed for Facebook and other social media platforms to get as many citizens as possible to learn about ARPA and provide their own input.

We ask that such citizen input be made easy to do, and comments and thoughts should be allowed to come to your office in almost any form. Even little things can have a big impact, and at the moment, the ARPA information could be much more prominent on the City's homepage. If it is going to serve as a "home-base," the ARPA page should expand to have more informative links to ARPA guidance, not just the City's own presentation, and be a place for everyone to track progress and outcomes through every step of the process.

It is encouraging to see the ARPA Director job posted. Our concern is that this is much too much work for a single person, and we encourage this effort to be fully staffed to ensure efficient and community-driven actions. Underlying the need for much-needed capacity is the core principle that any ARPA personnel, or consultants brought on board to meet capacity needs, should represent the community and be sure that there are people who speak and can translate the languages spoken in our neighborhoods.

Our intent is to have a fully engaged citizenry that understands the program opportunities, so individual projects and other investments selected have broad-based support that will help ensure success. Our citizens should understand why investments were chosen and what those choices will mean to the recovery. Public engagement should be continuous from ideas, to progress, to completion and outcomes! New Bedford citizens should take ownership and pride in what was accomplished with the ARPA resources we have been granted.

ARPA Funded Items that Require Immediate Action

We believe that several items can advance at the same time as the public outreach is ongoing due to their critical nature and the need to avoid actual crisis situations. These items go beyond the full deployment of funding used to enhance existing city services negatively impacted by revenue shortfall, but maintaining or even enhancing those core services is vital. These items include:

- An expansive grassroots COVID-19 vaccination campaign, given that New Bedford's 43% of the population being fully vaccinated, is lagging well behind the state average of 65%. This is verging on a crisis and should be a first action, so we don't have to slip back to earlier shutdowns. This should be seen as an all-in effort with all partners enlisted. Such a program should be a tool to bring the community together and get citizens (especially the young) excited about a "back-to-normal" situation. We could develop a program that is a national model for communities struggling with low vaccination rates.

- Assistance with sudden high rent increases should be an early action item with non-profit partners leading the way in the administration of outreach to those in need. We must market all available resources aggressively to every neighborhood.
- Due to the high-risk factors of this particular population, funding should be allocated for a Drop-in Opportunity Center for transient and single-room occupant renters.
- Support to resource providers for immediate emergency food assistance needs and gaps.

ARPA Policy Short-Term Investments

For year-one there is an opportunity to invest in projects and programs to establish a solid foundation for future actions. This recommendations offer chances to think big and to align and good planning with the leverage of future funding and private sector investment. Such examples include:

- Undertake the planning, design, and engineering for future private sector and infrastructure investments that meet City's articulated development goals, specifically internet-for-all and those highlighted in our last full report, *Realizing the Potential*. This would allow for key projects to be shovel-ready when federal infrastructure funds and other targeted ARPA funding from the EDA become available.
- We need a holistic and inclusive housing policy that addresses every level of market need in every part of the city. Such a comprehensive policy can be a year-one task that can inform investments in year-two and be marketed as a forward-looking document when attracting developers to targeted districts and sites. Inclusiveness, affordability, sustainability, energy efficiency, and great urban design should be the watch words of this policy work.
- While not outwardly exciting to all, there is a real need to fully modernize all zoning, licensing, and permitting regulations as a means to help facilitate business growth. Many lessons were learned last year in New Bedford and other cities across the Commonwealth, and such an effort would be a game-changing deliverable to an updated city-wide comprehensive master plan. The Permitting Task Force model is a good starting point, but more can be done to take actions to streamline city services specific to planning and development to make it easier and more efficient to approve the permitting to open a business, make improvements on a commercial property, or engage in new ground-up development.
- Explore ARPA eligibility for investments in eligible census tracts that strengthen connections to the water, public spaces, commuter rail, or other assets that allow for a robust, arts influenced, and user-friendly pedestrian experience in all possible areas of the city. Such investments will not only attract investment but can also be a source of community pride.

ARPA Project and Program Short and Long-Term Investments

The following project and program proposals may be funded in year-one or have funds obligated by year-two. We believe that as long as the project has meaningful impact, a longer-term execution timeline should not be considered a negative since investment of this scale is perhaps once in a half-century or greater. Following are proposals for Housing, Business Assistance, Capital Investments, and Community Wellness:

Housing Related

- Develop a sizable housing investment program as a means to encourage manageable home-ownership and drive new investment in all multi-family properties, including our most abundant, adaptable, and vulnerable housing stock—triple deckers. Such a program should be large enough to generate long-lasting results and be available in all eligible census tracts. Regardless of funding programs or specific regulations, New Bedford needs affordable, well-constructed, energy efficient, and safe options for new home owners and renters at all income levels.
- In addition to tenant assistance, we encourage the establishment of a City of New Bedford Landlord Mitigation Relief Program and an Eviction Mediation/Resolution Program that would bring all parties to the table with assistance of a qualified and trained Eviction Resolution Specialist. Such programs would help keep housing stock stable in our more vulnerable neighborhoods.
- New or proposed housing development projects that are shovel ready in targeted growth districts, meet the needs of those seeking housing, and can demonstrate high design standards, should be considered for direct investments in year-one as a means to fill reasonable funding gaps when all other resources have been exhausted.

Business and Non-profit Assistance

- Extensive investments in small business and non-profit recovery and accelerated growth out of the pandemic are a critical year-one action. Focusing on home-grown businesses and new start-ups should be a priority, and streamlined program offerings need to be flexible and efficient. New Bedford should have one of the strongest and most diverse ownership small business economies in the Commonwealth as a result.
- A reimbursement pool for businesses trying to staff-up again is vital in such a disrupted economy. We should reimburse these businesses for bonuses paid to existing employees who help the business staff-up or to help with reimbursing companies for part of bonuses paid to New Bedford hires.
- Entities structured as a non-profit must also be considered assets that can drive our recovery—regardless of the community-based mission that is their particular focus. Non-profits employ our citizens, help others start businesses, develop cultural programming, care for our children and so much more. Often it is these very services that allow for our workforce to be at its most effective.

Capital Investments

- Invest heavily in projects that focus on driving early-education and youth-based skills training while making important neighborhood investments in targeted districts. These projects and programs, specifically those serving children under 5 years of age where 90% of brain growth occurs, will pay dividends to a stronger New Bedford economy and a more able and sought-after workforce.
- Arts & culture, tourism, and hospitality investments have the potential to ignite economic activity, regional, national and international visitation, and local access to culture of all kinds. Looking to the New Bedford Creative Consortium for the widest possible investment concepts deserves its own focus, and we strongly encourage that effort from your office. In terms of more traditional viewed investments, we would particularly advocate for projects that are venue based (not day-to-day operations) capital investments, help to super-charge planned or over-subscribed local programs, and help drive a large-scale marketing and visitation/business recruitment promotion program should be prioritized given the one-time nature of the funding.

Community Wellness

- Non-profits that serve the community—particularly cohorts that have been hardest hit and are so often left out—should have a large percentage of funding set aside for direct/competitive grants to provide assistance to residents that meet ARPA eligibility—with a primary focus on access to health care, affordable housing, and other fundamental needs.
- The need to prioritize food security infrastructure has never been greater or been made more obvious as it has this past year. The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on the many gaps and shortcomings in our existing food system. We urge the City to utilize the recently updated regional food system assessment report to develop a long-term food resilience plan through the Southcoast Food Policy Council and lay the foundation necessary for building a regional food center in New Bedford that serves the communities of Southeastern Massachusetts.

In conclusion, we will offer these recommendations as a starting point in what should be a robust and inclusive community conversation. While the Regeneration Project Committee is certainly an engaged and diverse group of community leaders, our thoughts should only be a small part of the full engagement of New Bedford's citizenry.

This is not just about investing federal funds in specific projects, but what those investments will say about the values of our city. As we said last May, we understand that we will need to work harder, smarter, and in greater partnership than ever before. Please know that all of the members of the Regeneration Project Committee members and the businesses and organizations we represent are up to that challenge.

We thank you once again for the opportunity for direct input and our upcoming conversation on September 9th.

Sincerely,

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President
New Bedford Economic Development Council

Rosemary Gill
Executive Director
Zeiterion Performing Arts Center

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Patrick Murray
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